

Music a healing balm for hospitalized COVID patients

July 29 2020, by Pam Kragen



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Pharmaceutical companies worldwide are scrambling to develop drugs and a vaccine for COVID-19. But for dozens of San Diego patients now hospitalized with the disease, music is proving to be a soothing treatment

for worn-down spirits, agitation and fatigue.

Scripps Mercy Hospital San Diego in Hillcrest and UC San Diego Health facilities are among a growing number of hospitals nationwide offering COVID-19 patients free, one-on-one private concerts played virtually via iPad by string musicians all over the country.

The concerts are presented through Project: Music Heals Us, a 6-year-old nonprofit in New York that produces classical concerts in nontraditional locations such as nursing homes, homeless centers and correctional facilities. Since they launched the COVID-19 [concert](#) program on April 7, 88 musicians have presented 140 hours of music for 545 listeners at a dozen hospitals in eight cities from San Diego to Boston, according to Andrew Janss, co-artistic director of PMHU and a professional cellist.

Truong-Giang Huynh, the Intensive Care Unit manager at Scripps Mercy, has seen the therapeutic results of these 15- to 20-minute concerts first-hand. He is also a musician, having played violin for several concert organizations in San Diego over the past 20 years. He said he's watched with admiration how the brief musical interactions affect the COVID-19 patients.

"I watch the [professional musicians](#) playing for them and literally before my eyes I see the (patients) doze off," Huynh said. "It's really beneficial for the patient because these patients need to rest. A lot of them are agitated because of many medications and we're in their room constantly, so they lose sense of what's day and what's night."

Huynh said he has seen recently extubated patients, who are so agitated that their arms are strapped down to keep them from pulling out IVs and other tubes, suddenly sit still. And he saw a dying woman who had become unresponsive open her eyes when the violinist started to play.

The program is just as beneficial for the musicians, whose concert bookings have all been canceled for the year. They receive a \$100 honorarium per three-hour session, but Janss said most of them would be willing to work for free because performing for the patients offers them a way to use their talents to help others.

Among them is world-renowned violinist Timothy Chooi, who oversees all of the San Diego hospital concerts for PMHU. Based in Philadelphia, the Canadian-American musician has won top prizes at international competitions in Belgium and Germany in the past two years.

Chooi, 26, had just finished extended studies at The Juilliard School in New York and had embarked on an international career when the pandemic hit, canceling all of his engagements for 2020. He was grateful when Janss asked him to become the San Diego music administrator.

"All my life has involved goals toward musical performance since I was 3 years old ... For that to be stripped away hit hard," Chooi said. "The nice thing about when Andrew reached out is that it gave me a different sense of purpose. It's selfish to think how it's affecting me when there are people dying in this world and I didn't know how to help them until now."

Chooi plays the initial concerts at each new hospital himself. He said he likes to program music by the baroque composer Johann Sebastian Bach for the COVID-19 concerts because it's soothing. But because he's famed for his interpretation of Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto in D major, patients often ask for that in advance. He has also been asked to play music by the Greek new age composer Yanni and excerpts from Vivaldi's Four Seasons concerti. Hunyh said he's heard the musicians playing a wide variety of works at Scripps Mercy including Camille Saint-Saens' "The Swan" and Jules Massenet's "Meditation de Thais."

The PMHU program was brought to Scripps Mercy by Dr. Valerie Norton, who is the hospital's attending emergency department physician and chief physician operations executive. Through a fellow musician she heard about the program and thought it would be a great way to provide a personalized service for the lonely and isolated COVID-19 patients.

"In our hospital, we've always had complimentary healing touch, pet therapy, aromatherapy and some music therapy services for patients. But all of those were put on hold because with COVID we can't allow any non-essential people in the hospital," said Norton. "COVID patients can't have any visitors, either. This felt like a ray of sunshine I could bring in."

Norton is also a longtime viola player who performs in local quartets and quintets. She has long believed in the healing power of music.

"I find it all very mysterious," she said. "People have done studies that show that blood pressure goes down when you listen to classical music and levels of serotonin go up. Maybe it emulates the human voice or it strikes something deep inside."

Janss said the COVID-19 concert series was developed because he was looking for a way to provide work for musicians who PMHU had hired for spring concerts that got canceled when the pandemic hit. At the same time, one of his college friends who had given up music to become a doctor was assigned to run an ICU ward for COVID-19 patients in northern Manhattan.

To help reduce the doctor's commute from her home in Brooklyn, Janss—who is quarantining in California—offered her his Harlem apartment. Through that relationship, Janss learned that her hospital's staff was exhausted and had run out of ways to help the dying patients. So he proposed having the contracted musicians live-stream performances to the ICU patients via iPad.

The program was only supposed to run through the spring, but a New York Times reporter wrote an article on the program May 3 and interest in the program exploded. In the story's aftermath, Janss said more than 500 musicians throughout the U.S. reached out offering their services.

To handle the growing demand, PMHU appointed regional administrators like Chooi to oversee hospital clients and book musicians. The number of hospitals in the program continues to grow, including Scripps Memorial Hospital, which will introduce the program in its palliative care unit next week. Several other arts organizations have also been inspired to launch their own hospital concert programs, including American Modern Opera Co. in New York and Salastina Los Angeles.

Dr. Norton said she would love to perform concerts for patients at Scripps Mercy, but she's too busy dealing with the COVID-19 crisis. For now, she is just happy to sit in on the occasional patient concert when she can.

"It's very rare that you talk to anyone who doesn't like music," she said. "There's something about how our brains are wired, maybe from prehistoric times, that we love music. To have that little bit of normalcy in your life when you're very sick, I think it's very powerful."

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Citation: Music a healing balm for hospitalized COVID patients (2020, July 29) retrieved 29 February 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-07-music-balm-hospitalized-covid-patients.html>

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